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The CMR: An Enigma for Range Managers

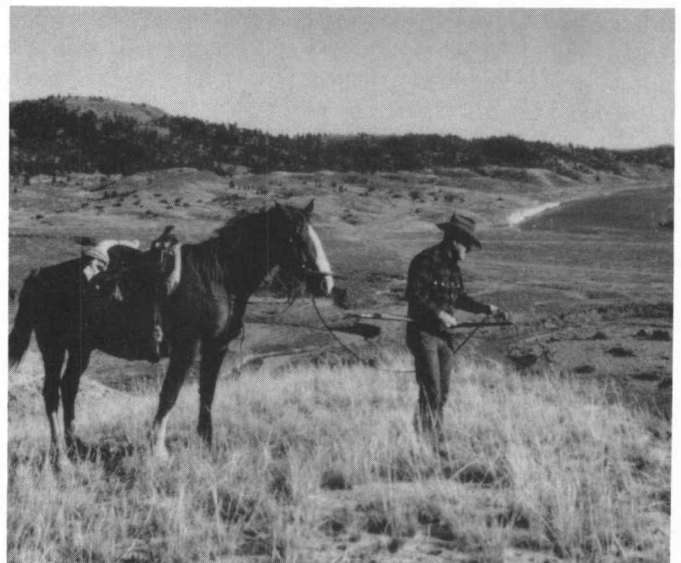
Kim Enkerud and John R. Lacey

The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR)—intriguing, beautiful, formidable, and controversial (Figure 1). Its management is a lesson for the range management profession.

Biological decisions affecting management on the CMR have been, and continue to be, made in the political arena. Unfortunately, the process of educating and informing politicians and their staffs of the goals and objectives of range management was never completed. An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has been written on the management of the CMR. Comments in it are laced with emotion, prejudice, bias, and the "I-am-right" attitude:

1. "Your response to my letter ... says that the economic impact will be insignificant to the region. I can assure you that this is not correct because I have not seen any prairie dogs paying property taxes to educate our school children, spending money for machinery..."

2. "The range which is 92 percent good and excellent condition needs no reduction in livestock or wildlife ungulates. The 33 percent overall reduction in livestock grazing is unwarranted. The utilization cuts used by CMR to compute stocking rates and proposed livestock reductions are unreasonable and not based on practical or scientifically sound data."



Range condition on the CMR is an answer to a stockman's dream.

3. "While the FWS economic analysis indicates no impact to the regional economy if livestock reductions are implemented, it does recognize that a few individual livestock operators would be substantially impacted. While this is unfortunate and regrettable, it does not seem significant enough to warrant further delay in the

Authors are Natural Resources Coordinator, Montana Stockgrowers Association, Helena, Montana; and Extension Range Management Specialist, Montana State University, Bozeman. Photos courtesy of Bob Ross, Range Consultant, Bozeman, Montana. (The Enkerud family ranches in northeastern Montana and has permits to graze cattle on the CMR.)

implementation of these reductions."

4. "We feel that at least a 33% reduction in grazing would be beneficial to that range for wildlife use. It would also allow a means to control the rancher that consistently overgrazes the areas leased to him."

5. "I was totally surprised that cattle grazing was allowed on this delicate and most fragile section of the Great Plains. I am not only in favor of the 33% reduction of grazing but am in favor of totally discontinuing the practice all together."

It is difficult, if not impossible, for the political process to manage resources when the public is so divided. To assess what went wrong on the CMR, the environment, government intervention and current controversy are reviewed. The lesson learned should reduce the occurrence of similar incidences.

Prairie, elk, wolves, grizzlies, bison, deer, antelope, Audubon's bighorn sheep, and black-footed ferret are "natives" of the region. The "Breaks" were hunted by bands of Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Crow, Cree, and Shoshone. During the early 1800's, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, natural scientist Alexander Maximillian, and artist Karl Bodmer travelled up the Missouri River and studied the region. Mountain men, miners, traders, and military men soon followed. After eliminating bison and taming Indians in the 1870's, early stockmen and optimistic settlers were able to move into the region.

The region was, and remains, well-suited for livestock production. After 100 years, range livestock-related earnings contribute over 70% of the agricultural receipts. Agriculture is the largest single income-producing sector of the regional economy.

Government Interaction

The CMR was established as the "Fort Peck Game Range" by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936. It stretches 125 miles along the Missouri River and embraces 1,094,301 acres of land and water (Figure 2). Its charter reserved forage for wildlife, particularly sharptail grouse and antelope. Excess forage "...except as...provided... to wildlife" shall be made

available to livestock under provisions of the Taylor Grazing Act. Wildlife and livestock management were placed under the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM), respectively.

The Game Range was renamed after Charlie Russell in 1963. Many old timers suspect that the current anti-livestock philosophy and policies of the FWS caused Montana's most famous artist to roll over in his grave.

Current Controversy

Controversy has been increasing on the CMR since 1976, when responsibility for livestock management was transferred from the BLM to the FWS. Currently, BLM retains management authority over the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, while the Corps of Engineers (COE) has primary jurisdiction of 588,464 acres, including the 249,000 acre Fort Peck Reservoir. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and FWS share responsibility for wildlife.

Eighty-seven livestock operators have permits to graze on CMR. Fifteen are dependent on the Refuge for more than 30 percent of their annual AUM requirements, ten operators get from 20-30 percent of their annual needs, and 62 operators get less than 20 percent of their annual forage requirements from the CMR.

The FWS is currently reducing livestock grazing by about 33 percent over a five-year period. Habitat management plans, either with or without permittee cooperation, are being developed for each allotment. Many plans include fencing the refuge boundary and continuous season-long grazing. These decisions are being implemented without the endorsement of the range management profession.

A range survey was conducted on the refuge in 1978, in accordance with the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) National Range Handbook. Range sites were identified, and plant species were compared with the range site guide criteria at climax to obtain range condition. Range conditions on grazing allotments were: excellent, 18 percent; good, 74 percent; fair, 7 percent; and poor, 1 percent. Poor range conditions were associated with prairie dog towns. The CMR may well be the largest contiguous range in the United States, of which 92 percent is in good and/or excellent condition (Figure 3).

The Lesson Learned from the CMR

The BLM, Forest Service, Extension Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Association of Conservation Districts, and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks actively participate in a Coordinated Resource Management Plan. However, the FWS has refused to participate. Thus, the normal process of mutual communication has been stymied.

The challenge on the CMR was really how to deal with people. Range managers should have understood the tension and conflict between government officials and livestock producers. Friction was unavoidable as livestock producers struggled for survival, with the FWS solely promoting wildlife interests. Ranchers have always distrusted government officials. What the FWS employees viewed as "doing their job", the rancher viewed as another attempt to remove him from

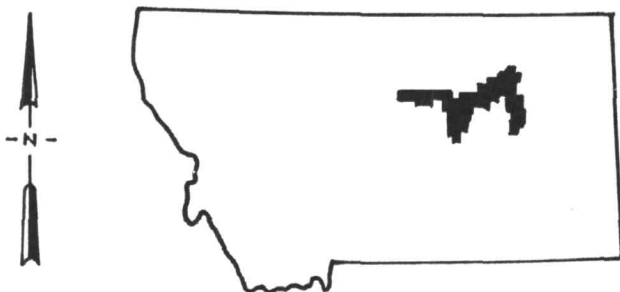


Figure 2. The CMR is located on the "Missouri Breaks" region of northeastern Montana.

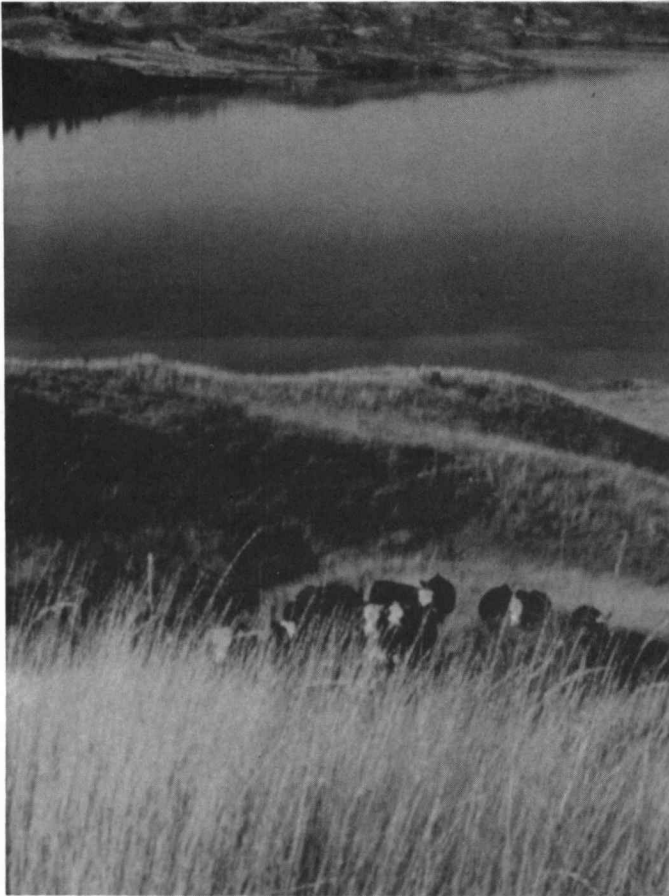


Figure 3. Cattle do not have to travel far from water to find grass on the CMR.

the livestock business. Consequently, controversy and frustration were inevitable.

Preventing problems from occurring would have been easier than trying to solve the current crisis. To prevent future enigmas, several strategies for improving the range manager's "politicking" are recommended.

Know How Government Is Structured

People in the executive and legislative branches of government are politicians. Most are elected to represent a particular area. They have aides (or a staff) to help get things done. To be successful, politicians must serve their parties' interest. You have an opportunity to increase their awareness of, and help them understand, natural resource problems. Do not hesitate to provide advice and counsel when it is requested.

Know Something about People

Learn the limits of people's perspectives. Empathize with what they seek to protect. Get a glimpse of their prejudices. Be understanding of the emotional need to "save face" or look good. The political process is geared to compromise. It's the name of the game and must be done graciously.

Be Honest with Everyone Including Yourself

Be truthful when telling your story. Show both sides—even if it hurts. People may disagree with you, but most admire honesty and hate dishonesty. If you expect good results from



Figure 4. Cooperative management between ranchers and government agencies has maintained and (or) produced excellent plant communities for wildlife, watershed, and livestock needs.

the political process, you must provide the system with good information.

Work Hard to Participate with Other Groups

Many professionals in range management get so wrapped up in their own work, they forget about others. Help yourself by educating other groups and people about what you do. It will pay, in terms of a better, more satisfying professional job in the management of the resource. Be visible, open, and available. Form a good image of yourself and who you represent.

The four steps to understanding and working with the political process can be learned through trial and error. However, trial and error is often a slow, painful process. Courses designed to enhance an individual's political effectiveness would be a valuable addition to agricultural curricula.

Ninety-two percent of the CMR range is in good and excellent ecological condition (Figure 4). The condition is attributable to cooperative management between private interests and government agencies.

Regardless of private interests or government intervention, the CMR will continue to be drained by the Missouri River and be home to antelope, prairie chickens, deer, elk, and other wildlife. Recreational use will increase. Under FWS jurisdiction, we feel that livestock grazing will be phased out. The frustration and bitterness currently experienced by livestock permittees and other multiple-interest groups will increase. In our opinion, the "quality of life" for which the CMR is famous will deteriorate.